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Secrecy of U.S. Reconnaissance Office Is Challenged

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 28 — The exceptionally secret status of the National Reconnaissance Office, one of the nation's most expensive and sensitive intelligence organizations, is likely to be reviewed by the Reagan Administration, according to senior Government officials.

At present, even the existence of the office is officially classified. In the intelligence community, it is known as a "black" operation, meaning that nothing about its work or the identity of its officials is subject to public scrutiny.

The mission of the office, according to scarce reports that have arisen over the years, is to oversee the development and operation of spy satellites used to photograph foreign territory and to monitor international communications.

Its budget, which is hidden in Air Force operations, exceeds \$2 billion a year, according to Government officials. By comparison, the budget of the Central Intelligence Agency is about \$1 billion.

Level of Secrecy Challenged

The office's special status is being challenged, however, by some Government officials and by others outside the Government who are concerned that the extreme level of secrecy is excessive.

Some officials, including senior Reagan Administration aides, are concerned that the wholesale secrecy surrounding the office has debased the value of other security classifications. The office's classification can be reduced or eliminated by Presidential executive order.

Others in and out of the Government believe that the office has used its secret status to shield past abuses and a history of major cost overruns.

Specifically, documents released by the Central Intelligence Agency under the Freedom of Information Act disclosed that satellites operated by the reconnaissance office were used in the late 1960's and early 1970's to photograph antiwar demonstrations and urban riots, in an apparent effort to determine crowd size and the activity involved.

Potentially Embarrassing Areas

The documents, which deal with intelligence operations considered potentially embarrassing to the Central Intelligence Agency by its officials, mention satellite imagery "possibly outside the C.I.A.'s legislative charter." They were released, some in 1979 and some in recent weeks, to the Center for National Security Studies, a privately financed research organization often critical of American intelligence activities.

A former senior official at the reconnaissance office said in an interview that such uses of satellites were "quite likely," although he said he had no firsthand knowledge of such domestic surveillance.

Two former intelligence officials said they had heard of such uses from colleagues at the time. One said the Central Intelligence Agency ordered the reconnaissance office to turn satellites on the United States as part of its effort to collect intelligence about domestic unrest.

Photographing public gatherings or demonstrations by satellite would not necessarily be illegal, according to officials. The use of such photographs by the Central Intelligence Agency for domestic intelligence gathering would, however, have violated prohibitions against agency operations in the United States.

Maneuvering of Satellites

The routine operation of satellites, including such maneuvers as turning them on and off and facing them toward or away from the sun, is handled by the reconnaissance office. The Central Intelligence Agency, which receives and analyzes imagery, and the National Security Agency, which is the recipient for communications monitored by satellite, generally determine what terrain and communications are selected for surveillance, intelligence officials said.

The most advanced photo reconnaissance satellites, using sophisticated cameras with powerful lenses, can produce clear pictures of cars, trucks and even individuals from orbits 100 miles high, officials said.

The former official of the reconnaissance office also confirmed that projects managed by the office had run as much as 100 percent over budget. Other officials familiar with the office's budget said that excess costs had reached four or five times projected totals.

The reconnaissance office contracts with companies such as the Lockheed Corporation and the Hughes Aircraft Company for the design and manufacture of satellites. Government officials said the office's extra expenditures could be only partly justified by the advanced technology required in satellite development.

Concern About Oversight

"Some of the overruns raise questions about proper management of the program," said a Senate staff member familiar with the reconnaissance office. He, as well as senior Government officials interviewed, asked not to be identified because of the strict secrecy governing the office.

They agreed to discuss the subject, they said, because of concern that the office had operated without the rigorous overseeing normally given to intelligence work by Congress and the executive branch.

The budget and staff of the reconnaissance office are hidden in Air Force operations, officials said. Its director is normally the Under Secretary of the Air Force or the Assistant Secretary for Research and Development.

Congressional oversight is handled by the Senate Select Committee of Intelligence and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

Defense of Committee Actions

Spencer Davis, a staff member who is spokesman for the Senate Intelligence Committee, said "the committee feels it is fulfilling its responsibilities" to oversee intelligence agency budgets. He said he could not comment on allegations of excess costs by the reconnaissance office.

When a prospective Air Force Under Secretary or Assistant Secretary goes before the full Senate for confirmation, no mention is made of the office's dual responsibilities. One Senator on the Intelligence Committee estimated that two-thirds of his colleagues in the Senate would not know they were simultaneously voting to approve the head of the reconnaissance office.

A similar lack of knowledge appears to exist in the House. Representative Benjamin S. Rosenthal, Democrat of Queens, who has been a Congressman since 1962

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